On the DVD

TUTORIAL FILES
The ever-bulging **Tutorial Files** folder is the place to be to check out this month's instructional soundbites

Discography

ALBUMS
Blue Lines (1991)
Protection (1994)
No Protection (remix album by Mad Professor) (1995)
Mezzanine (1998)
100th Window (2003)
Danny The Dog Soundtrack (film renamed Unleashed) (2004)
Bullet Boy Soundtrack (2005)
Collected - Greatest Hits (2006)

Sound like...
Massive Attack

Mac PC

The Bristolian three-piece recently capped a glittering career with a greatest hits collection. But what made *Mezzanine*, their 1998 masterpiece, so special?

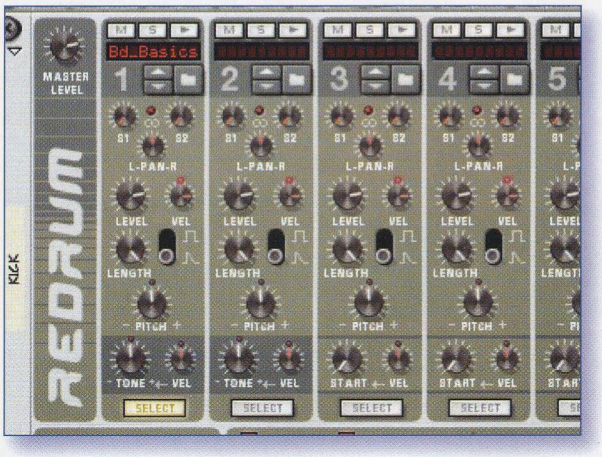
The year is 1998 and seven years have passed since the release of Massive Attack's hugely acclaimed debut album, *Blue Lines*. Despite being one of the defining British acts of the intervening period, the band have only managed to release one more album in that time. Expectation runs high – the soul vibes of the classic single *Unfinished Sympathy* still end about 50% of the country's club and pub nights, after all – but the more observant fans already know that things will be a little different this time. They've already bought the new single, *Rising Son*, and have noted its slower and more dub-oriented vibe. They're anticipating a much darker, moodier affair this time around.

Those fans who have read the interviews will have some idea why, too. Although Massive Attack is officially made up of Robert '3D' Del Naja, Grant 'Daddy G' Marshall and Adrian 'Mushroom' Vowles, the forthcoming album is to be composed largely by Del Naja and his new studio sidekick, Neil Davidge. Vowles wanted to stick with the original formula and so kept a low profile, while Marshall straddled the fence and consequently played a much less prominent role too.

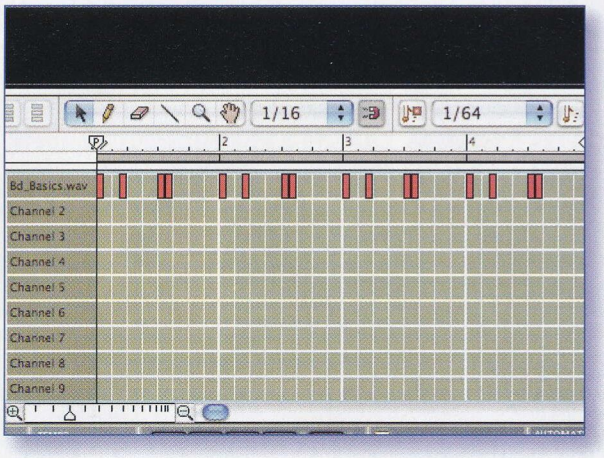
Put in this historical context, it's a testament to the British record-buying public's intelligence and enthusiasm (no, seriously!) that *Mezzanine* was the success that it was. A dark and moody affair it certainly is: the whole thing is held together by deep sounds, atmospheric FX and haunting vocals from Liz Fraser of the Cocteau Twins and Horace Andy, the only vocalist to feature on all of the first four albums.

As *Mezzanine* is so dub-influenced, we won't be using a lot of treble boost in our quest to emulate it. Low-pass filters, reverbs, dub-delays and heavily effected guitars are the order of the day here, plus plenty of analogue synth snippets and other aural weirdness. We're using Reason to make our track, but as ever, any DAW will do. **cm**

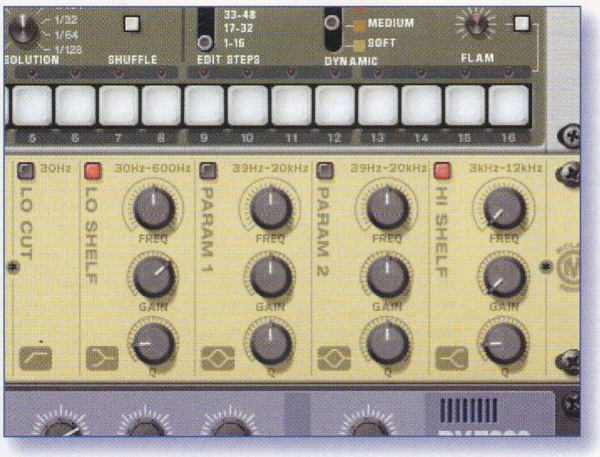
STEP BY STEP Drums



1 Start by loading a big, rounded kick into one drum sampler and a sidestick into another (we've used Reason's Redrum for both). Set your project tempo very low to get that moody *Mezzanine* feel. We've opted for 75bpm and looped everything over four bars. »



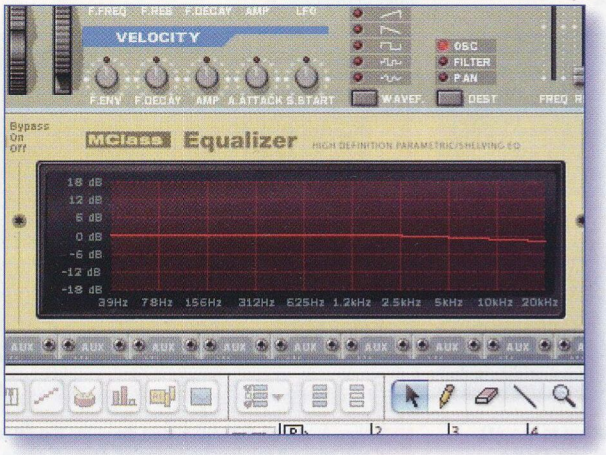
2 Program or tap out a simple pattern like this. It's worth quantising the beats strictly too, as at this pace, the rhythm doesn't really need any swing. Make sure your kick and sidestick are on separate channels, as we'll be adding individual processing later. »



3 Add EQ and reverb units to the kick path – we've used the MClass EQ and the RV7000. Apply some low shelving boost to give weight and roll off the top end down to around 1kHz to get that lo-fi, bass-heavy dub feel. Add a little reverb to the kick but roll off the top end. »

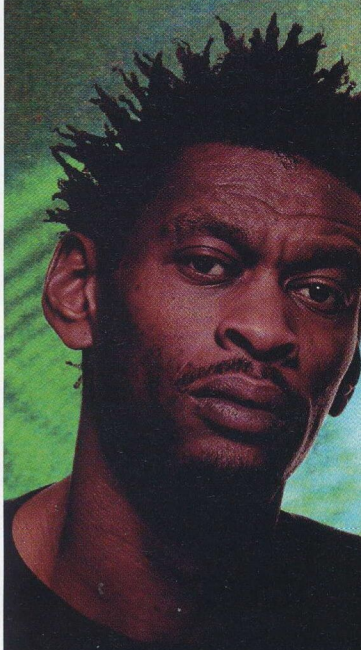
4 It's a similar story with the sidestick – you can use exactly the same plug-ins. We want it to sound hugely reverb-laden, but we need to roll off some top end – though not as much as on the kick – so that things don't sound too bright and happy. Think moody! »

5 Now to add that crusty vinyl feel with a vinyl crackle sample – you'll find one on the DVD, so load it up into a new sampler preset and place it on C3 with a keyrange of an octave in each direction. Enter a one-bar note at F2 and copy it for all four bars. »



6 Finally, insert an EQ (we've used the trusty MClass EQ) and roll off a little of the top end of the vinyl crackle. Set the levels so that the vinyl crackle is quite loud and you get the impression that the kick and sidestick are a loop taken from an old, poor quality record.

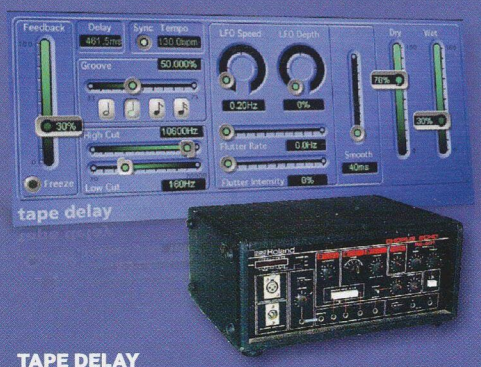
PRO TIP
BITS ON THE SIDE
One of the best ways to get signals to sound 'lo-fi' is to roll off the treble (old analogue tape wasn't great at picking up the high frequencies). You should also use some gentle overdriving plug-ins to create a tape saturation effect. And if you can lower the bitrate of your project or parts, try going to 12- or even 8-bit.



PRO TIP
IN THE BEGINNING
When you come to arrange your track, consider how long an intro you plan to have and how many parts it's going to contain. If it's quite short and you don't have that many parts (ten or less), you should leave them all on and simply delete the ones you don't want. If it's longer and has more parts, it's probably quicker to mute them all at the start and unmute as you go.

INFO
►LO-FI
An abbreviation for low-fidelity, lo-fi is commonly used to refer to crackly, slightly distorted, dull or otherwise analogue sounding signals. And it sounds much better than it... um, sounds!

HARDWARE TO SOFTWARE: Rub-a-dub-dub, three ideas for, er, dub...

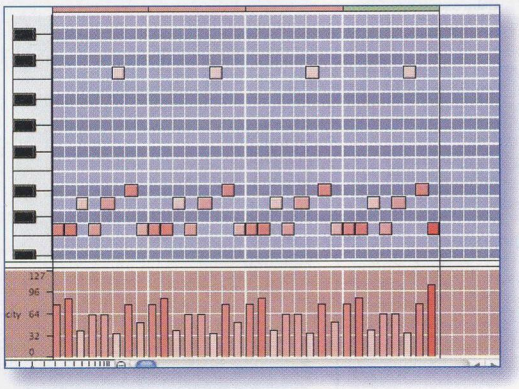


TAPE DELAY
We've got no concrete evidence that Massive Attack used a tape-delay (like Roland's classic RE-501), but this effect is pretty integral to the dub vibe that permeates *Mezzanine*. If you don't have a specific tape delay plug-in, try imperfectly tempo-synced delay times and roll the treble off the delays.

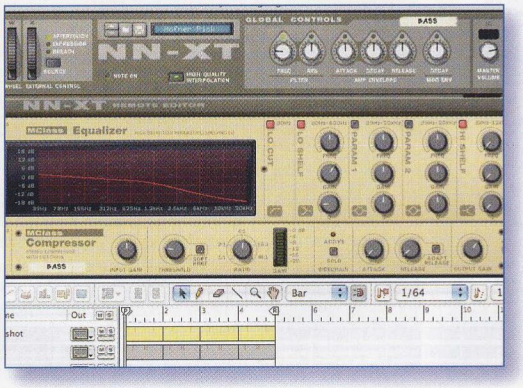
AKAI MPC SERIES/REDRUM
We have legendary mix engineer Mark 'Spike' Stent to thank for this – in an interview about the mixing process of *Mezzanine*, he let slip that the Bristol boys brought their MPC3000 into the studio. To emulate the Akai vibe, use a drum sampler like Reason's Redrum with plenty of swing, and try non-percussive samples.

GUITAR PEDALS/AMPLITUBE 2
Another 'Spike' Stent tip-off, this one. Apparently, he used a variety of guitar pedals to get the cool effects and vibes on everything from breaks to vocals and guitars. There are plenty of pedal-emulating plug-ins to choose from. They come bundled with most sequencers, and you also get plenty in AmpliTube 2.

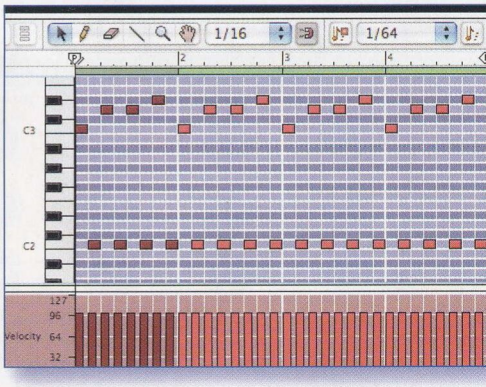
STEP BY STEP Establishing the bas(s)ics



1 In honour of Mezzanine's first single, *Rising Son*, load up the deepest and most rumbling bass guitar patch you can find. We've used the NN-XT sampler patch **Hofner Pick** from the Reason Factory Soundbank, but anything deep will do. Play a rolling 'one-two-one-two' bassline looping over one bar to create the backbone of the track. »

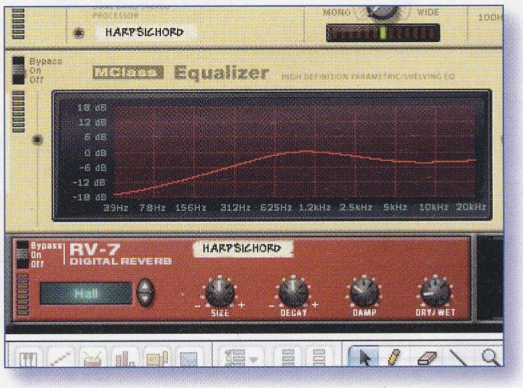


2 As with our percussion, we need to roll off the top end. We've used an MClass EQ with the high shelving set to its lowest range and full attenuation. After this, insert a compressor to fatten things up a little. We want things quite squashed for a big, heavy sound, so firm settings are the order of the day. »



3 The track needs a haunting musical element – we wa a *Teardrop* kind of vibe, which means using a guitar or harpsichord patch. We've opted for the latter, which means loading up the **Harpsichord** NN-XT patch from the Reason Factory Soundbank. You need a similar rolling, 'one-two-one-two' pattern to the bassline. »

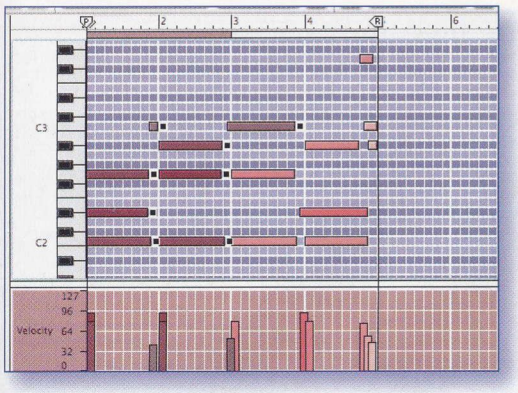
4 We've inserted an RV7000 reverb unit set to the **ALL Warm Plate** preset followed by an MClass Stereo Widener to add some size and depth. Any plate reverb and stereo widener combo will do, though. Be careful to only add stereo width to the high frequencies, though, as leaving the bass mono keeps more presence in the mix. »



5 Now insert an EQ (yep, we've gone for the MClass again!) and trim off the low frequencies. Roll off some top-end to continue the dub theme, and also attenuate some of the brightness around the 6kHz mark. Finally, insert a large hall-style reverb at the end of the chain. Lo-fi is fine (we've used Reason's basic RV-7) so stow that convolution plug-in! »

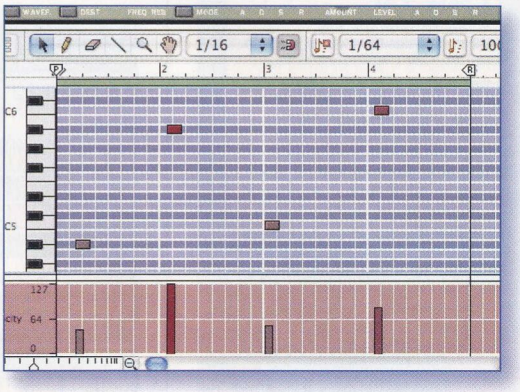
6 It's time to try a few tricks to pull our elements out of the mix. Insert a low cut at around 30Hz into your master output, then add some stereo widening to the upper frequencies and a limiter to squash the levels a little. We've used MClass effects for all three of these inserts, but anything you have in your sequencer should do the trick.

STEP BY STEP Building on a theme

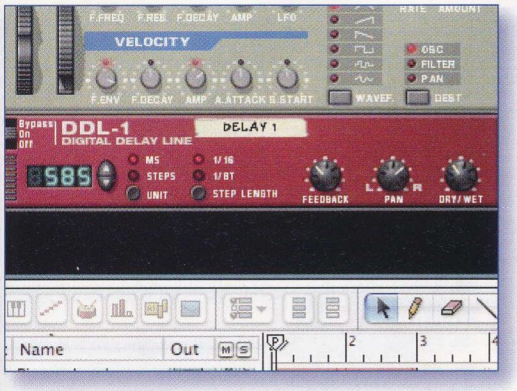


1 Everything's sounding a little too melancholy now (even for a *Mezzanine Sound Like...*) so we're going to add some piano chords. Pick out a nice piano sampler preset (NN-19's **GrandPianoSoft** in our case) and play around with a few chords. We've played a new chord on the first beat of each bar in our four-bar loop, adding a few little flourishes here and there. »

2 The piano needs plenty of atmospheric reverb (we've gone for an RV-7 set to Hall), stereo spread (MClass), low EQ cut, low shelving and attenuation around 3.5kHz (MClass), and very subtle tube distortion (Reason's Scream 4). The aim is to keep the piano moody and large but still separated from the other elements. »

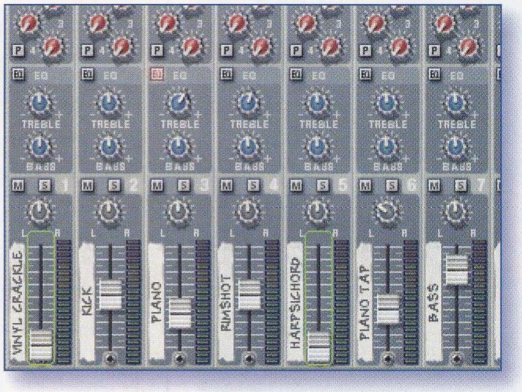


3 It's finally time to add some atmosphere, and that means quick little sounds with lashings of delay and reverb. Insert a bright piano preset into the project (ours is NN-19's **BRIGHTPIANO**) and tap a musically tasty key once every bar. Try putting these on the 16th note just after the first beat. »



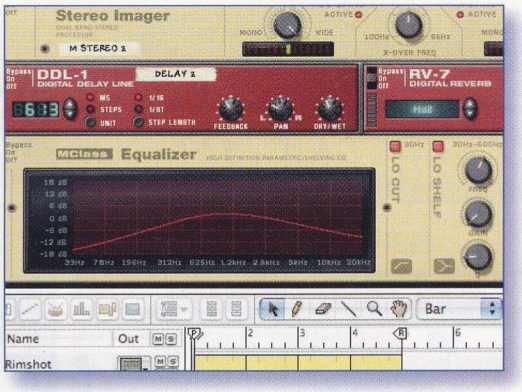
4 Now insert a delay, and rather than reaching straight for the tempo sync, try setting up something manually in milliseconds, for an atmospherically imperfect tape delay-style vibe. We've used Reason's DDL-1 with a setting of 585ms, which is just about the perfect delay time for this tempo and vibe – close, but not exactly in time. »

5 Now insert whichever large hall reverb you've been using for your other parts into this one too (we've used RV-7). Also, take this opportunity to pan the delays slightly right and the main signal slightly left, to add a bit of interesting space. This needn't be scientific at all – just trust your ears and instincts. »

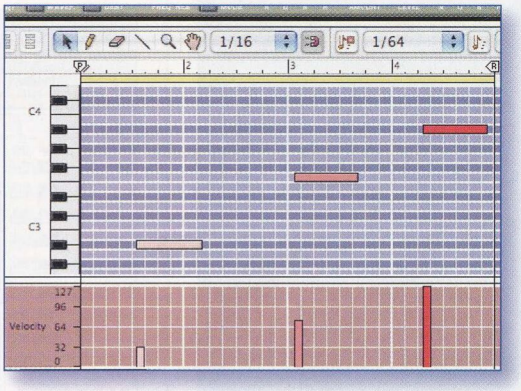


6 At this stage, it's probably worth resetting all your levels again so you can get a proper feel for the kind of vibe we're after. We want our kick and bass nice and loud – particularly the bass, which should really growl. If you've EQed and written it right, the other elements should all sit comfortably in their own little parts of the timing and frequency ranges. »

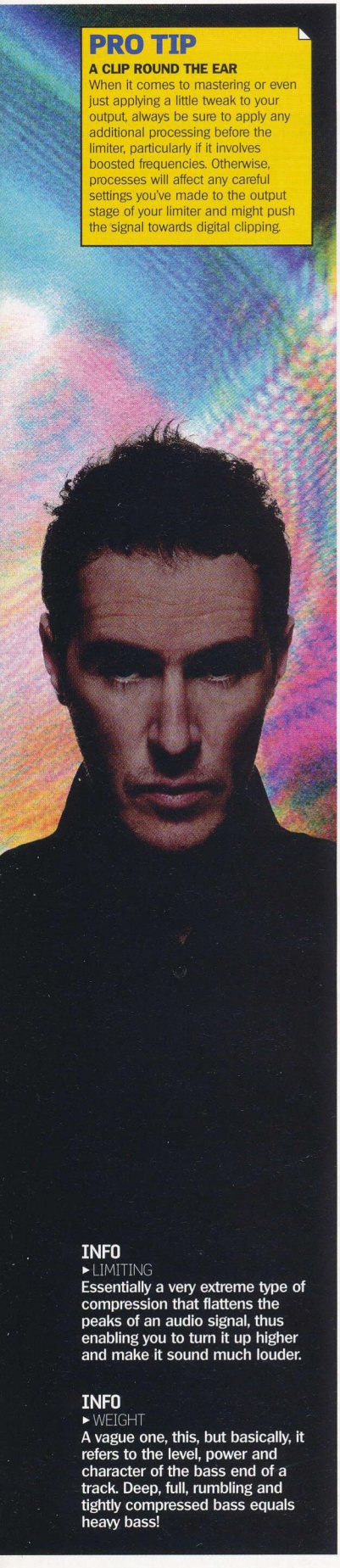
7 The only thing missing now is some kind of ambient sound effect, as without at least one of these, ours is a pretty pale imitation of a *Mezzanine*-style track. Load up the supplied sound effect, **Massive Attacking Swoosh.aif**, into a fresh soft sampler preset, mapping it to C3 and letting the keyrange span two octaves in each direction. »



8 This time, we've added the effects first to get the vibe. We've gone with a delay (DDL-1) set to 613ms. This means the delays come in slightly later than our piano tap, creating a nice loose vibe. Also, pan the delays slightly left and the channel slightly right – the opposite of our piano tap. Apply your preferred hall reverb and some extreme low- and high-shelf attenuation. »



9 We've tweaked the patch so that the attack is a little slow and used the low-pass filter to roll off some of the top. We've also started the sample a little later and finally detuned it by about -23 cents to get it in key. Now it's simply a matter of playing one lazy key per bar – somewhere around the halfway mark of each should do it. Nice!



PRO TIP

A CLIP ROUND THE EAR

When it comes to mastering or even just applying a little tweak to your output, always be sure to apply any additional processing before the limiter, particularly if it involves boosted frequencies. Otherwise, processes will affect any careful settings you've made to the output stage of your limiter and might push the signal towards digital clipping.

INFO

▸LIMITING

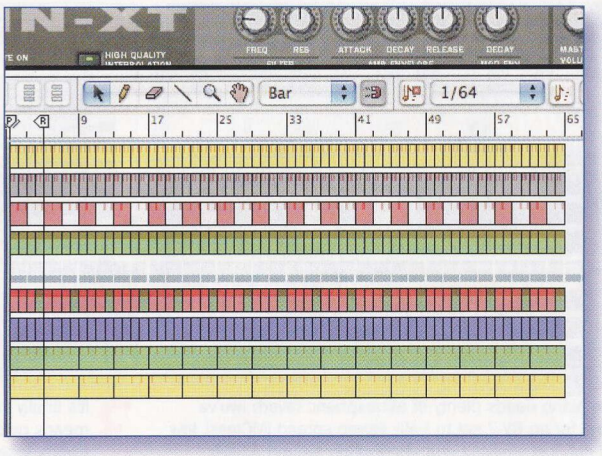
Essentially a very extreme type of compression that flattens the peaks of an audio signal, thus enabling you to turn it up higher and make it sound much louder.

INFO

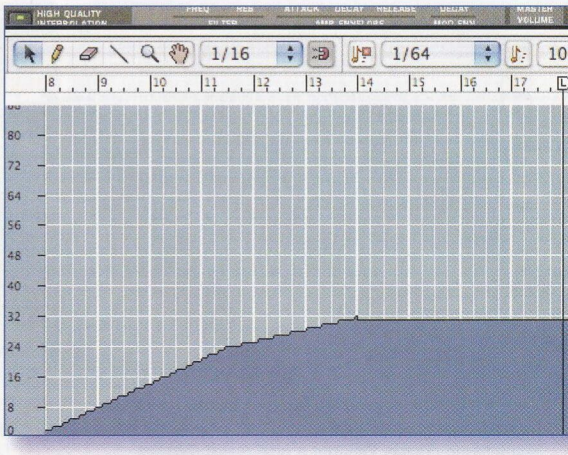
▸WEIGHT

A vague one, this, but basically, it refers to the level, power and character of the bass end of a track. Deep, full, rumbling and tightly compressed bass equals heavy bass!

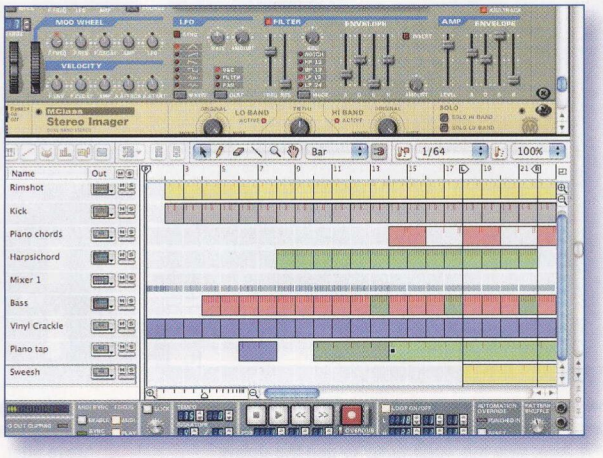
STEP BY STEP Alternative arrangements



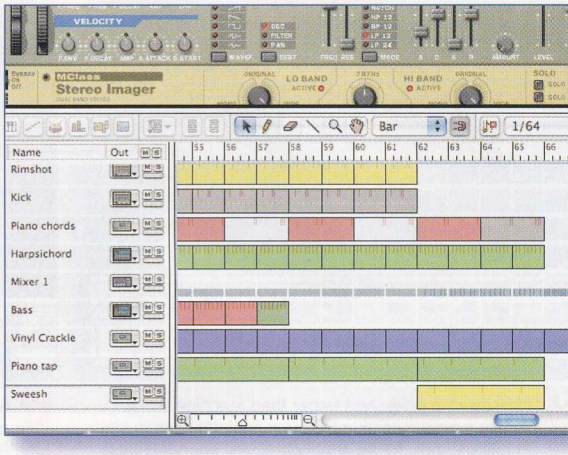
1 Massive Attack arrangements aren't really too complicated. On *Mezzanine*, we're talking building up intros and dropping parts in and out, plus breaks, grooves and subtle crescendos galore. But as with every arrangement, we'll start by copying parts over the length of the track – that means about 64 bars (or three minutes). »



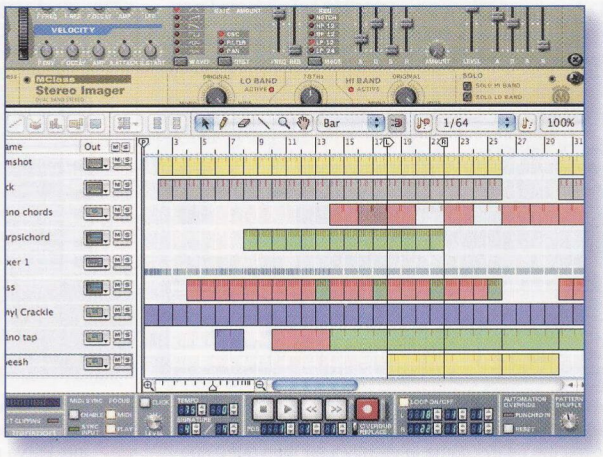
2 Highlight all 64 bars and shift them over by one bar, then copy one bar of the record crackle back to fill the gap at the start, making a record crackle intro. Kick off with the beats and bring in the bass after a couple of bars. For an authentic *Teardrop*/*Rising Son* vibe, use automation to raise the level of the harpsichord part slowly. »



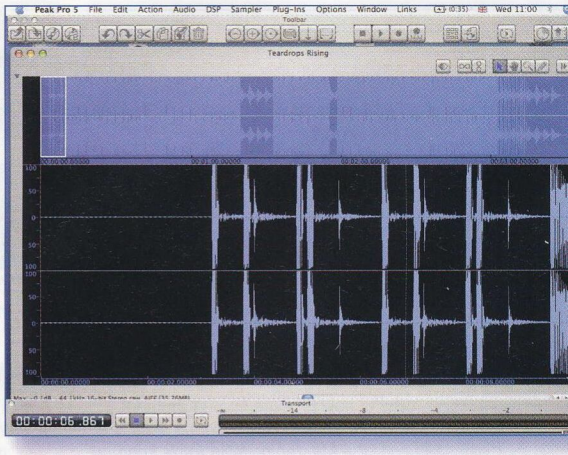
3 As the harpsichord part reaches its peak volume, drop in the chords to take things to a peak. The piano taps can play fairly steadily throughout, as they're quite atmospheric without being obtrusive, but the atmospheric 'sweesh' needs to be applied with caution in the little drops and edits. Speaking of which… »



4 Massive Attack-style instrumental arrangements need plenty of little drops. The key elements to play with are the harpsichord and bassline, as removing one or both transforms the vibe, and putting them back in provides a great boost. For the outro, simply drop the drums, fade in the harpsichord and finish with the vinyl crackle. »



5 To finish, try dropping, moving or adding the odd note, drum hit or sound. Try repeating two-bar sections of your four-bar piano parts to add drive and contrast with the full part. But don't overdo it – have faith that your track can keep people hooked for three minutes »



6 Mix down your track, load it in a wave editor and use the best analogue-style mastering limiter you have. We've used PSP Vintage Warmer's **Mix Finalize 1** preset and upped the drive a bi For extra bass, we've used BBE's Sonic Maximizer before the limiter.

NEXT MONTH: Orc